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ABSTRACT

Several factors come into play in the discussion of foreign languages and improved prospects for employment. With regard to the question of proficiency, it seems that prospective employers are more realistic than teachers in their expectations. If an employee is good in the field he or she is in, further language training is often made available. A survey of firms hiring personnel with some German-English skills indicated that there were increasing numbers of openings for persons with reasonable fluency in German and expertise in another field. The transportation industry which is involved in international travel requires basic communication skills. Because of the growth of multi-national corporations and the influx of immigrants, American communication needs are changing rapidly. Other factors in communication patterns are competition among industries and increasing U. S. involvement everywhere overseas. With these changes comes an increased marketability for foreign language skills. (AMH)

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Foreign Language Learning and Career Opportunities

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

In preparing my remarks, I thought enthusiastically about two publications I received recently on job opportunities for college and university graduates with foreign language skills. One of the two is a directory of manufacturers, government agencies, foundations, and media.[1] All of these potential employers hired people with foreign language skills. The author included addresses and phone numbers of persons to contact, brief descriptions of the activities of these organizations, facts and figures delineating foreign sales, proportion of foreign sales to total income, and even the number of persons hired in recent years. In sum, the book confirmed long-felt assumptions that foreign languages are applicable (if not indispensable) to a great quantity of U.S. businesses and organizations. The other fount of my enthusiasm was a transcript of a conference very much like this one,[2] at which there were thirteen speakers who represented exciting career fields, such as: international banking, international law practice, health professions in third-world countries, travel, and international civil service.

Upon further reflection, I was not quite so thrilled with singing loud hosannas to foreign language study. Many of the employers listed in my first resource expected their employees to possess a firm foundation in some field of expertise. In fact, many of the glorious job opportunities were mid-level positions, acquired only after an initial period in that particular industry, or one that was similar. I started thinking of the proficiency level that we produce in our undergraduate majors, and I wondered whether it is sufficient. I questioned what the job expectations of an individual with limited language fluency would be, and I asked if our language training is adequate.

In 1967, a study was completed that tested the proficiency levels of undergraduate majors, using the MLA Proficiency Tests for Teachers and Advanced Students.[3] The test scores were then converted to the proficiency levels described by the federal government. The Departments of State and Defense use a proficiency

rating scale from zero to five. Level five describes an educated native speaker; level three is considered minimum professional proficiency, and level one delineates the ability to say hello, goodbye, how are you, and a bit more. The median score achieved on the comprehension section of the French exam was between levels two and two-plus (Carroll, p. 42). French teachers were shocked. They interpreted these results as meaning the average French major could understand something more than "bonjour," "comment allez-vous," and "où est la bibliothèque?" German majors fared somewhat better, achieving comprehension and speaking proficiency levels of three and two-plus-to-three, respectively. (p. 43). German professors, too, were highly disappointed. On the reading and writing tests, I must add, scores for these two languages were at or above level three (a highly respectable score for anyone who has not spent extensive time in an area where the language is spoken). This, by the way, is the level aimed for, though not always achieved, by the courses presented by the Foreign Service Institute and the Defense Language Institute.

Language teachers were so distraught becuase their faith in the audio-lingual methodology had nourished the belief that they could produce proficient speakers of another language in 250 hours of instruction spread over 2 years (that would apply to those taking a 4-semester sequence). Language majors ought therefore to achieve level-4 proficiency, since they have so much more exposure to the language. Let me compare this to the federal government's language training. At the Defense Language Institute, the shortest course, in the "easiest languages," French and Spanish for example, meets for 720 hours. The German course lasts 960 hours, and the Russian course 1,410 contact hours.

Level-4 proficiency is desirable for teachers. Although the government language schools have a reputation for hiring only native speakers, level 4 is the minimum qualification, and some native speakers are not rated above level 4-plus. It is totally unrealistic to assume an undergraduate language major

can achieve this level. Is it therefore possible to acquire sufficient skill in a language to present oneself as an attractive candidate to a potential employer? Absolutely. Although language teachers typically expect their students to apply the characteristics of style found in the works of Nobel Prize winners writing their native language to the students' own efforts to express themselves in a foreign tongue, employers do not necessarily do so. In her testimony before the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies, the Vice President for Human Resources in the International Department of Chase Manhattan Bank told of her company's needs in hiring.[4] Banks, even international ones, do not look for language majors; they seek bankers, that is, potential bankers. Only 1/3 of the successful candidates for positions described by the speaker have the business orientation demonstrated by an M.B.A. The other 2/3 are split between M.A.'s in International Relations and B.A.'s. This last category, the B.A., is encouraging because it affirms the desirability of a liberal arts education as a background for business careers. The speaker stated that Chase has no language fluency requirement, but desires "demonstrated international interests," a parameter that can be met by academic studies in this area. It was noted that in 20 countries, it is essential for Chase employees to speak the local language (most frequently Portuguese, Spanish, French, German, Russian, and Italian).

Degree of proficiency would appear to be not so critical as demonstrated aptitude. A company can always send an employee for additional language training. During the last decade, a number of surveys have been conducted to determine the need among international industries and service organizations for employees with foreign language skills. One such inquiry, of German and Swiss companies in the New Jersey-New York-Long Island area looked at the types of jobs requiring fluency, familiarity, or working knowledge of German.[5] Among the larger firms, it was

found that top-level management personnel were either mono- or bilingual. In almost all cases, however, assistants and executive secretaries were bilingual. Among market researchers, personnel were educated in the U.S. and possessed a reading knowledge of German. Among those in personnel and product development, knowledge of German varied. Public relations and marketing personnel, it was felt, had no need to know German (the corollary is of course that U.S. firms in foreign countries need marketing and sales personnel who speak the local language). (I might add that as foreign investment here increases, more Americans are finding jobs in foreign firms as "local nationals"). Finally, in this survey of German and Swiss companies, it was found that legal departments make considerable use of bilingual lawyers. Another survey found that employers with significant needs for personnel who could speak German and English asked for majors in business, engineering, economics, chemistry, liberal arts, and journalism. This small-scale investigation, which looked at the German-English combination only, is typical of the surveys that have been conducted.[6] The 58 firms responding indicated over 8500 jobs in which reasonable fluency in German was desired. Most of these were managerial or technical positions. It should be noted that only one respondent asked for native-level fluency. If we cannot produce a native speaker in 600 hours of instruction, what can a prospective language student aim for? If we eliminate language teaching as a desirable vocation, to what use can the target language be put? In the classroom, the teacher of art may bring students to an appreciation of Michelangelo's fresco in the Sistine Chapel as a glorious manifestation of a theocentric Weltanschauung. But can we answer the question, "Was he paid to paint the ceiling?" Herein lies an unexploited resource, the application of a skill. Too seldom do we try to apply the reading capability acquired in four grueling semesters of French to a research project in an upper division political science course. We ignore the opportunity to apply the skill gained in four terms of German, after reading Goethe, Nietzsche,

Böll and Brecht, to a research effort in chemistry or physics, in which the student would use periodical sources published in German. Worst of all,--and this is perhaps the deadliest sin of American provincialism--once we leave the language classroom, we forget that English is not the only language spoken in our environment. We read current events in the English-language press; we even research foreign affairs using only English-language materials. Language use is often abandoned at the classroom door. If we restrict language use to linguistic or philological subject matter, we preclude any recognition of applied language skills. Neither teacher nor student should fail to recognize the almost limitless need for daily communication in more than one language, in all kinds of circumstances, among all kinds of people. Holiday Inns, a few years ago, began a program identifying personnel (from busboy to hotel manager) who can assist foreign tourists in their own language. The Holiday Inn program not only repudiates the perception of foreign language study as subject matter solely for the upper socioeconomic strata; it reflects the tremendous increase in the number of tourists coming to the United States. The repeated devaluation of the dollar has made it more reasonable for foreigners to visit the United States. Although travel by U.S. citizens to foreign countries increased by 1,083% between 1950 and 1975, language study is no longer only for those who envision themselves as jet-setters capable of conversing with the local European natives.

Perhaps the most visible industry involved in international travel is transportation. You will remember, I am sure, the television commercials that appeared a few years ago that portrayed Pan Am stewardesses who spoke three languages. The skill of communication is not taken lightly by this major airline. In the past two years, Pan Am went about recruiting for 400 customer-contact positions. To meet its needs, the company had to interview 16,000 applicants.[7] The most frequent reason for rejection was that the applicant had insufficient command of a second language. I must emphasize that the employer was not asking its job

candidates to possess the ability to discuss, in French, the Sartrian approach to ontology, but to have the capacity to ask directions, order a meal, and answer potential passenger questions.

In a major industrial nation in which only a small proportion of the college-student population studies any foreign language, there should be no doubt that those who can communicate in another language should be attractive job candidates. Foreign language skills have become rare enough to foster the creation of such positions as correspondents in firms that do business with customers and suppliers in other countries. Correspondents handle mail written in a foreign language, research a response, and then answer the inquiry in the foreign language. In New Jersey alone, between 3,500 and 4,000 companies are involved in international business. Of some impact, too, on the need for foreign language skills, is the current trend of exporting American higher education, or of international educational exchange generally. We are drawing increasing numbers of foreign students to the U.S. It has even been recommended that the nation consider this as an export industry.[8] African, Arab, Chinese, and Iranian students are exposing us to their cultures. We need to communicate with these cultures. Often we need not know their language; we need only have the cross-cultural sensitivity cultivated through foreign language study. In some highly competitive fields, like medicine, we are exporting some of our students. Obviously, an American medical student in a Spanish-speaking country needs to question and understand the subject matter presented in class. This acquired language skill may well prove useful in diagnosing and otherwise dealing with patients later in the physician's career. You may have read of the proliferation of courses offered on such topics as Spanish for health care personnel. Since the United States is the world's fourth-largest Spanish-speaking country, we can assume the utility of Spanish in areas with a concentrated Hispanic population. If I were chief of police of Miami, or New York, or Los Angeles, I would

want to know that at least some of my personnel who were assigned to precincts in Hispanic neighborhoods could understand the people they are employed to protect.

A recent report by the General Accounting Office stated "the argument that Americans do not need a foreign language because 'everybody' speaks English is true or false depending on one's communication needs."[9] Well, what are our collective communication needs? Are they changing? Do they depend upon other variables? In 1977, U.S. News & World Report stated that in the period from 1950 to 1976, exports by free-world countries increased by 1,463%. Between 1950 and 1975, U.S. phone calls to foreign locations, excluding Canada and Mexico, were up by 5,517%. During the same period, U.S. investments overseas increased by 1,029%, and foreign investments in the U.S. increased almost seven-fold.[10] These figures do not include recent arrangements by Volkswagen to build their $300,000,000 assembly plant in western Pennsylvania; nor do they include Honda's negotiations in the Mid-West. How much is American business influenced by foreign industry? If we were to look at the "Fortune 500" companies, we would find that more than half send their employees to Berlitz; many of them earn more than half their profits overseas. Is it any wonder that since 1973, 43% of the chief executive officers of our largest 100 corporations have had some overseas experience?[11]

If one out of every six Americans owes his or her job to foreign trade, can we get by on English alone? Although American investments abroad have increased by a factor of ten in 25 years, the percentage of American students in high school and college foreign language courses has dropped precipitously. Although fully one-seventh of the Gross World Product is accounted for by the multinational corporations,[12] only 8.9% of America's college undergraduates are studying foreign languages.

This anomaly bodes well for those job applicants who can offer a prospective employer some familiarity with a foreign language. In 1975, the mutlinationals

did one-half trillion dollars' worth of business. I doubt it was all conducted in English. Surveys in states like Oklahoma and Arizona, that are not identified as oriented toward international commerce, shipping, tourism and the like, are finding that businesses within their boundaries frequently need individuals with foreign language skills. In January 1978, a survey conducted by the Albuquerque Tribune found that U.S. corporations hired 100,000 foreigners for positions for which these corporations could not find Americans with foreign language skills. A survey conducted by the University of South Carolina showed that 60% of the businesses that indicated a need for foreign language skills reported they expected their personnel to use these skills while entertaining foreign business representatives within the state of South Carolina.[13] A 90-mile stretch of coastline in North and South Carolina boasts more foreign investment capital than any location in the world of comparable size. Some firms are beginning to take the attitude expressed by one executive: "Visiting foreign businessmen never fail to be pleasantly surprised when they visit our offices and find personnel able to converse with them in their language. Often they are swept off their feet."[14] A flight to Paris in 1947 took 17-1/2 hours. Today, we can reach Europe in as little as 3-1/2 hours. As one commentator noted, although many of us watched our Bicentennial Minutes brought to us by a Dutch oil company over Japanese TV sets, we still think the world speaks English.

The status of American industry relative to that of the rest of the world has changed in the last 25 years. Once we had little competition. Now it seems it is only in the high technology industries that we have a competitive edge. Especially in research-intensive industries, we cannot wait for a translation of the latest development to appear. Without competence in other languages, we will continue to fall behind in marketing our wares. While we were industrially supreme, our customers in the international marketplace would deal with us on our terms. When we buy materials, the seller will accommodate us, at least as long as we are a preferred customer. If we must compete with other sellers,

however, we must offer a better product, a lower price, better service, or some other feature to make the product more attractive. Let me show you what we have done in this regard.

General Motors markets its Chevrolets in Latin America, as it does in other parts of the world. For some reason, one of its most popular models, domestically, was not living up to sales expectations in this Spanish-speaking market. It seems the name Chevy Nova was fine for an English-speaking market. So long as the accent falls on the first syllable, the car lives up to its expectation of being a "new star." If, however, the accent falls on the second syllable, in a Hispanic market, we have Chevy no vá; and no one is going to buy a car that doesn't go. Some of the linguistic goofs caused by translating advertising campaigns is less costly perhaps, but endangers a company's image. A major U.S. manufacturer of pens and inks was just a bit embarrassed when it discovered that in the vernacular of a particular foreign market, it was advertising that the use of its product would prevent pregnancy. I am not sure how it recovered from that faux pas.

Of course, some American businesses make special efforts to accommodate potential customers. Brazil currently presents one of Latin America's most lucrative markets. Not long ago, I read , in one of the airline magazines,[15] an account of one U.S. businessman's attempt to be neighborly to a prospective Brazilian client. Although the South American spoke excellent English, his guest continued to muddle along trying to make the best of his college Spanish. With great effort, in good salesmanlike fashion, he tried to get on the client's good side. Some time after his return home, he received a letter from the Brazilian. Why, the prospective customer had wanted to know, did the North American not wish to speak English, since he obviously would have been more comfortable with that language. Even more confusing to the Brazilian was that he could not understand why the visitor had insisted on speaking Spanish, a language that was foreign to both of them. It must have been quite a shock to find out, too late, that not all of South America speaks Spanish.

While I am on the topic of using the wrong language, let me direct your attention to the federal government, in whose employ I once supervised a staff of translators who were hired to translate from their native language into their acquired one, instead of the other way around, which would have been preferable. Consider the State Department employee who is trained in a foreign language at an enormous expense so that he or she can be sent overseas to present a positive image of the United States. The opportunity for the individual is tremendous; the exposure to a foreign culture, the chance to see the arts of another nation , to see how others view their difficulties and how they solve their problems, is an occasion not to be missed. The various arms of the government send back their interpretation of American relations with the host nation. But how many of them study the nations they live in through indigenous media? Many can keep up with current events by reading the International Herald-Tribune, or for the military, the Stars and Stripes. They can read what the American press overseas says about Americans overseas. And they can read articles written by Americans who do not speak the language of the country they are reporting on. Is it any wonder that our intelligence network makes "misjudgments?" Of course, I am presenting the worst possible example. A more positive picture could also be drawn. The Dean of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania has written that the world is "wired together so tightly that a short-circuit could fry us all."[16] Our interdependence can be discovered in a number of ways. At one time, non-business representatives of one country residing in another were primarily diplomats. Today, the Department of State is by no means the primary U.S. presence in other nations. The Defense Department has more personnel stationed in many countries than the diplomatic arm does. Add to that, representatives of the Departments of Commerce, Agriculture, Justice, Labor, and Treasury; the Peace Corps, the Agency for International Development, the International Communication Agency, the International Trade Commission, the Overseas Private

Investment Corporation, the Export-Import Bank, the Foreign Claims Settlement Commission, and the Inter-American Foundation, and we start to get a better picture of the extent of governmental interest in global interdependence.

Both the government and private business will send their employees for schooling in foreign languages, when an overseas assignment is anticipated. To do so, however, is expensive. The prospective employee who can offer some facility in a foreign language has a marked advantage. Accountability for training time enjoys considerable emphasis in the government. The employee who starts a language course and finishes ahead of schedule, because of some previous familiarity with the language appears to be brighter, more enthusiastic, better motivated. The same is true, even more obviously so, for the junior or mid-level executive.

In my comments so far, I have tried to avoid crystal ball-gazing; i.e., I do not wish to predict winning combinations of languages and pragmatic subject areas. It is becoming the vogue to offer certain combinations, like German and business. Executive German courses, like Spanish for service occupations, are expanding substantially. Many students are opting for double majors: a language major, so as to enjoy continued exposure to the target language, and a "practical" major (a vocationally-oriented major) to increase their chances for success in the job hunt. A language major <u>per se</u> may or may not be necessary to enable an individual student to acquire a desirable competence in a foreign language. What is crucial is that the student enjoy continued exposure to, and use of, the language. If that means the level of sophistication of a classroom discussion must suffer while an individual stumbles over the agreement of subject and verb, or falters in choosing the gender of a noun, then suffer it must. Continual practice is absolutely essential.

A pragmatic major may get the student his or her first job, but there is no guarantee the field chosen will not be overcrowded in a few years. One of the

most popular job-hunting manuals now on the market indicates "the average worker under thirty-five years of age goes about the job-hunt once every one-and-a-half years." The book further claims "experts estimate, the average worker will change careers. . . three to five times in his or her lifetime--i.e., go into a new field for which (upon first examination) his previous experience would not seem to qualify him or her."[17] In this light, it seems clear that an article by syndicated columnist Sylvia Porter last summer should carry the title "Foreign Language is Job Insurance." (see note 11). Since so many jobs can be performed better by knowing more than one language, the transferability of foreign language skills should be recognized immediately. Increased employability, better job performance, enhanced cross-cultural communication are all to be gained from foreign language study. Whatever you do professionally, if I were employed on Madison Avenue, I might say, "Do it in a foreign language!"

NOTES

[1] James E. Knott, Career Opportunities in the International Field (Washington, D.C.: School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, 1977).

[2] Five College International Career Conference. Proceedings of a Conference held at Mount Holyoke College, 30 April 1977 (n.p.: Five College Committee on International Programs, 1977).

[3] John B. Carroll, The Foreign Language Attainments of Language Majors in the Senior Year (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1967).

[4] Susan Davidson, Vice-President for Human Resources, International Department, Chase Manhattan Bank, N.A. Testimony before the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies, 12 January 1979.

[5] Lucie Kirylak, "Foreign Language Career Preparation," ADFL Bulletin, 5, No. 1 (September 1973), 42-47.

[6] Rita Terras, "The 'Market' for German-Speaking Employees: A Survey," ADFL Bulletin, 6, No. 3 (March 1975), 26-28.

[7] Yoshi Bator, Director of Language Development, Pan Am World Airways. Testimony before the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies, 12 January 1979.

[8] Aaron Fuller, "Point of View," Chronicle of Higher Education, 23 October 1978.

[9] General Accounting Office. Study of Foreign Languages and Related Areas: Federal Support, Administration, Need. Report to the Congress. (Washington, D.C.: GAO, 1978), p. 26.

[10] U.S. News and World Report, 18 July 1977, 24-25, as cited by Louise Fiber Luce, "The New Mediators: Foreign Language Departments in a Post-Modern Era," ADFL Bulletin, 10, No. 1 (September 1978), p. 25.

[11] Statistics taken from Sylvia Porter, "Foreign Language is Job Insurance for Future," Columbus [Ohio] Citizen-Journal, 18 Nov. 1978, p. 7.

[12] International Education Project, American Council on Education, Education for Global Interdependence: A Report with Recommendations to the Government/ Academic Interface Committee (Washington, D.C.: IEP, ACE, 1975), p. 9.

[13] As reported by Peter A. Eddy, "Foreign Language Skills and Jobs," a paper presented at the Pacific Northwest Conference on Foreign Languages, Vancouver, 18-19 April 1975.

[14] As reported in Lucille J. Honig and Richard I. Brod, Foreign Languages and Careers (New York: Modern Language Association, n.d.) p. 9.

[15] James Randall, "First of All, They Don't Speak Spanish," Clipper, June 1977, p. 36. Clipper, produced by East-West Network, Inc., New York, is Pan American Airways' in-flight magazine.

[16] George Gerbner, as quoted in Education for Global Interdependence, p. 4.

[17] Richard Nelson Bolles, What Color is Your Parachute? (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1977) p. iii (page number supplied; preliminary pages unnumbered).